

“ENDOCRINE DISRUPTING CHEMICALS”


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Introduction

Dear Honorable Members of the European Parliament,
Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the conference on endocrine disrupting chemicals at the European Parliament which is hosted by MEP Christel Schaldemose and which has been jointly organised by BEUC, the Danish Consumer Council and the Capital Region of Denmark. Why are we doing this conference? Imagine you need urgently to make a phone call to leave an important message to somebody. However, no matter how often you try, the telephone line is always busy. Imagine, you try again to make this phone call at a later stage, and you will get through but unfortunately you will be connected to the wrong person. Imagine you try one last time to make this important phone call and suddenly there will be many different people being on the same telephone line speaking chaotically all at the same time and nobody will understand what others are saying.

This is exactly what endocrine disrupting chemicals are doing in our bodies: they prevent the right messages to get to the right recipient at the right time.

This may trouble our hormonal system and consequently lead to many health problems such as obesity, diabetes and fertility problems. Blocking the line through endocrine disruptors also occurs frequently in wildlife leading to drastic reduction of animal populations.

1. Safe products – a core consumer right

BEUC, the European Consumers Organisation, has a membership of 44 well respected, independent national consumer organisations from 31 European countries. BEUC acts as the umbrella group in Brussels for these organisations and our main task is to represent our members and defend the interests of all Europe's consumers. One of our members is the Danish Consumer Council who gave the idea and incentive for this conference based on their campaign against endocrine disrupting chemicals in cosmetics and other consumer products.

Ensuring the safety of consumers is one of our eight headline goals. In the area of safety we aim to improve the general safety of products sold on the EU market as well as the safety of specific consumer products, such as toys, cosmetic products and products for children. We want to raise awareness with decision makers of the risks posed by chemical substances on health and the environment and try to ensure that the exposure of consumers and the environment to dangerous chemicals in particular from consumer products will be minimized.

Every day we come in contact with an enormous range of man-made chemicals which are contained for example in food, cosmetics, textiles, toys and furniture. We use skin creams with parabens, computers with brominated flame retardants and hair dyes with resorcinol. Our plastic kitchen tools contain bisphenol A and our shower curtains contain phthalates. Children's toys are full of nonylphenol, PAHs (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons) and plenty other hazardous chemicals. In other words, we are continuously exposed to chemicals from all the products we encounter in our everyday lives.

However, most consumers are unaware of the risks posed by dangerous substances contained in these products. Those substances may for instance cause allergies, cancer, have hormonal disrupting effects and/or damage the environment.

Among these chemicals are also nanoparticles which are increasingly being used in consumer products, although the risks they may pose to human health and the environment have never been assessed.

A healthy environment and safe products are particularly vital for the most vulnerable consumers such as children and pregnant women. Until a couple of years ago, scientists still often believed that the placenta shielded cord blood would protect the unborn child from most chemicals and pollutants. However, studies which analysed the blood of newborn babies showed that their blood already contains hundreds of hazardous chemicals such as heavy metals, flame retardants, dioxins, phthalates and pesticides¹. These findings must be worrying for all of us as the exposure to chemicals in the womb are likely to lead to serious health problems in a later stage. Many of the substances that have been found in newborn babies are known to cause **cancer** or to be **toxic** to the brain and nervous system. Moreover, many of the substances are suspected to **disturb the hormone system of humans and animals**.

¹ <http://www.ewg.org/reports/bodyburden2/execsumm.php>

2. Risk assessment has to take into account added effect of chemicals and low-dose effects

The effects of those hazardous chemicals on humans and the environment are traditionally evaluated on the basis of single substances, chemical by chemical. Consequently, also the risk management measures are usually based on single substances leaving out the **chemical cocktail effect**. However, we know that the combined effect of chemicals is greater and more toxic than the effect of single substances. It has to be stressed that chemicals which are not harmful on their own may have harmful effects when combined with other substances which also do not have an effect on their own. This means zero plus zero plus zero does not equal zero. The current risk assessment and risk management approaches are therefore inadequate to protect human health and the environment and need to be updated. Relevant EU legislation such as the Cosmetics Regulation, the Toy Safety Directive, the Regulation on Food Contact Material and many other pieces of legislation urgently need to be updated taking into account the combination effects of chemicals and the challenges posed by endocrine disruptors taking into account the precautionary principle.

We are in particular concerned about the use of chemicals in every-day products which are suspected to interrupt the hormonal system. So called **“endocrine disruptors”** are substances that act like hormones and disturb the normal functioning of the endocrine system. The endocrine system is a network of glands and hormones that regulate many of the body's functions, including growth, development and maturation. The exposure to endocrine disruptors leads to abnormalities in animals. The negative effects such as for example malformed genitals have been shown in several laboratory studies. The situation for humans seems not to be any better as endocrine disrupting chemicals are suspected to lead to various illnesses such as diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular diseases. They may damage brain development of babies and lead to abnormal behavior. Moreover, there is growing concern that they have a very negative impact on reproductive health as they seem to cause fertility problems. In men, they may lower the sperm quality and lead to testicular cancer. In women, they may trigger early puberty, early menopause and breast cancer².

² Girl, disrupted. Hormone disruptors and women's reproductive health, workshop paper, Commonwealth, California.

Moreover, research has suggested that male fetuses around 8-12 weeks after conception can be effectively demasculinised by exposure to chemicals such as phthalates which are used as softeners in soap, rubber shoes, bath mats and soft toys. Phthalates seem to block the action of testosterone in the womb and are alleged to cause low sperm counts, high rates of testicular cancer and malformations of the sexual organs.

One area of concern is linked to so called "**low-dose**" effects. It seems that a contact with very small amounts of endocrine disrupting chemicals may already unbalance the hormonal system in particular when the exposure takes place in a critical stage of development. The statement of Paracelsus "The dose makes the poison" seems therefore to be questionable when it comes to endocrine disrupting chemicals. Because of potential low-dose effects we cannot exclude that toxicologists who are responsible for assessing exposure have been misguided in past decades and have given false assurances of safety.

3. Taking action based on the precautionary principle – the Danish example

As there is growing concern about endocrine disrupting chemicals, some EU Member States have taken action based on the precautionary principle which goes beyond the minimum requirements that have been set at EU level.

In **Denmark**, several measures have been taken by the government to protect children better from endocrine disruptors. Bisphenol A has not only been banned in baby bottles but also in food packaging which is used to pack food for children under the age of three. Moreover, Denmark is the first country to ban two parabens (butylparaben and propylparaben) in lotions and other cosmetic and personal care products for children under the age of three.

The **Danish Consumer Council** initiated in November 2009 a **campaign** against EDCs with a focus on cosmetics and personal care products. As a starting point, the EU priority list of endocrine disrupting substances (category 1) has been cross-checked with the list of substances which are currently permitted for use in cosmetic products and 17 substances have been selected. Consumers were provided with a list of these 17 substances for instance by an SMS service. Consumers had been asked to report products which contain one or several of these 17 substances and in December 2010, more than 1.000 reports from consumers had been received. This shows a very high awareness among consumers for this issue.

Today almost 1.200 products are on the list of products containing EDCs, a lot of them brand names as you can see in the display of product examples in our little exhibition. A campaign on endocrine disrupting chemicals in cosmetic products will also be launched by the Consumer Council of Norway later this year.

4. What actions MEPs can undertake to lower the exposure of consumers and of the environment to endocrine disrupting chemicals?

The Commission is already working on endocrine disrupting chemicals based on a Commission strategy and based on the Council of Environmental Ministers request in December 2009:

- o to make recommendations as to how exposure to multiple endocrine disruptors should be further addressed within relevant existing Community legislation, inter alia in the context of its forthcoming report on the implementation of the Community strategy on endocrine disruptors to be completed **by 2010**.
- o to assess how and whether relevant existing Community legislation adequately addresses risks from exposure to multiple chemicals from different sources and pathways, and on this basis to consider appropriate modifications, guidelines and assessment methods, and report back to the Council by **early 2012 at the latest**.
- o to pay appropriate attention to the precautionary principle and the potential risks of chemical combination effects when drawing up future proposals, inter alia by assessing the need for risk management measures to protect the environment and human health.

The urgency of the matter entails that the Commission needs to speed up and to reinforce its strategy on EDCs.

You as **Members of the European Parliament** have plenty of opportunities to ensure that the exposure of consumers and the environment to endocrine disrupting chemicals will be reduced.

- o It will be crucial that all future legislation takes into account the chemical cocktail effect and the precautionary principle.
- o You should call on the European Commission to propose a ban of endocrine disrupting chemicals which are used in personal care and cosmetic products.

- You should also call on the Commission to revise the chemical provisions of the Toy Safety Directive (2009/48/EC) as the provisions are insufficient to protect children from negative effects of endocrine disrupting chemicals.
- You should call on the Commission to propose phasing out endocrine disrupting chemicals such as bisphenol A from particularly food contact material and other products in general and to ask for replacing them with safer alternatives.
- You should call for more research funds to be allocated under the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7) for projects which investigate the chemical cocktail effect and the effect of endocrine disrupting chemicals on humans and the environment. When preparing the 8th Framework Programme for Research (FP 8), make sure that research on the combination effects of chemicals and on EDCs will be made a priority.
- In 2010, the Environment and Health Action Plan (EHAP) came to an end. The Commission and the European Parliament should decide on a second Environment and Health Action Plan which will contain concrete proposals how the combination effects of chemicals can be better addressed in EU policy making.
- When discussing the 7th Environmental Action Programme, ensure that it focuses on the need to reduce the exposure to hazardous chemicals.
- Call for key actions to be contained in the future Action Plan on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) to ensure that consumers will only be offered toxic free products. For instance all Implementing Measures under the EU Ecodesign Directive should address the use of hazardous substances in consumer products. Moreover, you could propose extending the scope of the EU Ecodesign Directive to all products with a considerable environmental improvement potential. As MEPs have the right of scrutiny, you could raise the level of ambition through your participation in the Ecodesign decision-making process.
- The implementation of REACH is a slow moving process and it will take a lot of time before the most dangerous chemicals are put on the candidate list (SVHC). Therefore you could suggest that the substances on the EU list of endocrine disrupting chemicals are put on the candidate list or even on the authorisation list, until it is proven that they do not harm our health or the environment. Until then safer alternatives should be used.
- You could become an “ambassador” for consumers needs when meeting companies and call on them to phase out endocrine disrupting chemicals with substances of lesser concern.

- You could also support consumer organizations when they demand a ban on chemicals of concern.
- There are many more actions how you as an MEP can contribute to give new impulses to the policies on endocrine disrupting chemicals such as own initiative reports and parliamentary questions.

Conclusion

The clock is ticking! The more time we loose to address the risk of endocrine disrupting chemicals in consumer products properly, the more often we will experience wrong telephone connections in our bodies in the future. We think that consumers have the right to safe and harmless products.

Today we will hear more about the health problems we're facing, about what is being done from the Commission, about what business is doing and hear about how consumers cope with the risk associated with the EDCs.

We need to learn from the lessons of the past. Chemicals invented for the good of us all, turn out to be bad for everybody and the environment, but it takes decades to have them forbidden. We need to reverse the burden of proof – chemicals have to be proven safe before put on the market. Therefore we call for precautionary bans of chemicals that have endocrine disrupting effects. Only then can we turn back the clock and make the world a better place for our children and grandchildren.

End.